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ABSTRACT

This factsheet examines alcohol use among college students. It explains how to identify problem drinking, discussing negative consequences of drinking, excessive consumption and intoxication, and reasons for drinking. Correlates of problem drinking are described in the areas of personality and gender; peer, family, and environmental influences are considered. It concludes with a look at counseling and alcohol education programs. Ten resource documents are listed. (NB)

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HIGHLIGHTS ...An ERIC/CAPS Digest

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Alcohol Use Among College Students

Introduction

Students on some college campuses use alcohol to signify their emerging adulthood, to enhance social gatherings, and to cope with stress. As studies have revealed the extent of excessive or problem drinking, however, college administrators have become increasingly concerned about understanding and controlling alcohol use and abuse. In states that have raised the drinking age to 21, college administrators must also consider relevant legal issues. Physical injury and loss of life among students provide additional compelling reasons to address the problem of excessive drinking (Shore & Rivers, 1985). College personnel need to understand the causes and consequences of problem drinking and tailor educational and counseling programs to the students' needs.

Identification of Problem Drinking

Negative Consequences. One way to identify problem drinking is in terms of its negative consequences. At colleges these problems include a reduction in classroom performance, lowered grades, difficulties in residence hall management, and destruction to property (Shore & Rivers, 1985). Administrators believe that alcohol is involved in damage to residence halls, violent behavior, violation of campus policies, physical injuries, and emotional difficulty. Also attributed to alcohol-caused behavior are 29% of academic failures and 21% of students who do not remain in school (Anderson & Gadaleto, 1985). Engs and Hanson (1985) have also found a significant incidence of hangovers, drinking while driving, and missing class because of hangovers.

Excessive Consumption and Intoxication. Another way of identifying problem drinking is by the amount and frequency of students' alcohol consumption. One study classified students into four groups based on amount and frequency—abusers, users, weekenders, and socials—and identified behavior differences among the groups (Hetherington & Keene, 1985). Meyer (1986) and Johnston, Bachman, and O'Malley (1986) have shown that although most college students confine their drinking to weekends, they tend to drink heavily on such occasions (five or more drinks in a row). This pattern is increasing among college students at the same time that it is decreasing among their non-college age mates and among high school students (Johnston et al., 1986).

Reasons for Drinking. As Berkowitz and Perkins (1986b) have noted, problem drinkers have distinctive motivational patterns and, therefore, drinking for certain kinds of reasons may itself define problem drinking. Some problem drinkers use alcohol to control stress (Beck & Summons, 1985) or to cope with negative affect (Johnston et al., 1986). Studies of DWI (Driving While Intoxicated) offenders indicate that they appear to drink in isolation and for coping with stress. Other studies suggest college students drink in a more social atmosphere with the intention of getting drunk. This seems to indicate a more recreational and perhaps experimental approach to alcohol use by the college students (Beck & Summons, 1985). Alcohol educators should be especially sensitive to students who use alcohol as a coping mechanism.

Correlates of Problem Drinking

Personality and Gender. Compared to nonproblem drinkers, problem drinkers are impulsive, prone to deviant behavior, less oriented toward academic success, more independence-seeking, and more likely to drink for escapist reasons (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1986b). With regard to gender differences, information on the increase/decrease in use among college women is conflicting. However, the prevalence of heavy drinking remains much greater for males than females (Johnston et al., 1986). Women also show a greater resistance to drinking than do men, except in dormitory living situations (Shore & Rivers, 1985).

Peer, Family, and Environmental Influences. The greatest influence on college students' drinking is their peers. As Shore and Rivers (1985) point out, variables related to influences prior to college, i.e., family, religion and parental alcohol consumption, do not appear to be highly related to RDP (resistance to pressure to drink), but variables within the college environment, such as class standing and living unit, seem to correlate with RDP. Shore and Rivers suggest that perhaps students view college as a "time out" from the "real world," with its own rules and expectations, and look to the college world for guidance and standards. Misperceptions about alcohol use abound, especially among freshmen students. Most students and resident advisors perceive a more liberal norm when a more moderate norm actually exists (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1986a). That is, students have relatively conservative personal attitudes toward drinking, but believe the general attitude to be quite liberal. Misperceptions tend to increase with increasing size of the social group (friends, housing peers, campus at large) and increasing social distance between the group and the perceiver (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986).

Explanations for increases in drinking or acceptance of problem drinking include broadbased changes in American society—roles of women, alternative life styles, and intergroup relations (Engs & Hanson, 1985). For specific problems, for example, the rise in drinking while driving, the causes seem to be complicated. Although studies indicate that raising the legal drinking age contributes to

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reduced drinking while driving, the legal prohibition against drinking for young adults may make automobiles a "safe" place for them to drink. That is, automobiles may provide a place where under-age students can drink away from school or other authorities. Increased heavy drinking, or drinking rapidly to destroy the evidence, may be a factor in the increase in hangovers and missing class because of hangovers (Engs & Hanson, 1985).

Counseling and Alcohol Education Programs

Since many students do not seek out individual counseling, alcohol education coordinators often must rely on other methods of education such as multi-media campaigns, group sessions, and special classes and seminars. Hetherington and Keene (1985) have designed a program based on classifying students by the amount and frequency of their alcohol consumption. The specific methods for counseling each student user group include the following:

Abusers: Address psychological issues; stress the emotional impact of large amounts of alcohol; include a discussion of alcohol use and families (children of alcoholics are more likely to be abusive drinkers).

Weekenders: Address the relationship between alcohol use and social issues. Include students in organizing campus events; see that such events are nonalcoholic.

Users: Address the effects of alcohol use over time and the physiological effects of alcohol; teach bartending for nonalcoholic drinks.

Socials: Address students' feelings regarding peer expectations; include a section on assertion skills and information on the role of advertising in creating drinking expectations; discuss social pressure.

Descriptions of effective alcohol policies indicate that prohibiting students from drinking on campus is usually not effective, and that providing guidelines on proper ways of handling drinking situations can help those who choose to drink. Administrators and alcohol education coordinators would be wise to take campus size/organization, student characteristics, and peer influences into account when planning alcohol education programs (Shore & Rivers, 1985).

Typical responses to the alcohol problem by school officials include the following: (1) seeking help from off-campus drug treatment facilities, residence hall staff, and alcohol education coordinators; (2) providing group counseling for students who are problem drinkers; (3) making sanctions more stringent for behavioral infractions that involve alcohol; (4) specifying the conditions under which group activities may involve alcohol; and (5) making advertising standards more stringent (e.g., alcohol cannot be advertised as the primary focus of an event, and off-campus establishments may not run "happy hour" advertisements) (Anderson & Gadaleto, 1985).

Some reports indicate that administrative attention to college students' drinking has resulted in stronger policies concerning student alcohol consumption on campus, increased reporting of alcohol-related problems by campus police or counseling and student health services, and increased alcohol education programming. This heightened emphasis on alcohol-related issues may itself contribute to reported increases in problem drinking, but the fact remains that the problems have always been there and still exist. The efforts of all college personnel to address these problems therefore continue to be needed.

Resource Documents

Anderson, D. S., & Gadaleto, A. F. (1985). *College alcohol survey, 1979, 1982, 1985.* Athens, OH: Ohio University. (ED 261 634)

Beck, K. H., & Summons, T. G. (1985). A comparison of the social context for alcohol consumption of college students and convicted DWI offenders. *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education, 30*(2), 31-39. (EJ 313 367)

Berkowitz, A. D., & Perkins, H. W. (1986a). Resident advisers as role models: A comparison of drinking patterns of resident advisers and their peers. *Journal of College Student Personnel, 27*(2), 146-153. (EJ 334 056)

Berkowitz, K. H., & Perkins, H. W. (1986b). Problem drinking among college students: A review of recent research. *Journal of American College Health, 35*(1), 21-28. (EJ 342 032)

Engs, R. C., & Hanson, D. J. (1985). The drinking patterns and problems of college students: 1983. *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education, 31*(1), 65-83. (EJ 327 685)

Hetherington, C., & Keene, J. M. (1985). Student drinking patterns and related alcohol education programs. *The Journal of College and University Student Housing, 15*(2), 17-20. (EJ 330 930)

Johnston, L. D., Bachman, J., & O'Malley, P. (1986). *Drug use among American high school students, college students, and other young adults. Trends through 1985.* Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research. (ED 273 239)

Meyer, T. J. (1986). 1 in 3 college students tries cocaine, study finds; Bennett urges president to crack down on drugs. *The Chronicle of Higher Education, 32*(20). (EJ 339 083)

Perkins, H. W., & Berkowitz, A. D. (1986). Using student alcohol surveys: Notes on clinical and educational program applications. *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education, 31*(2), 44-51. (EJ 335 597)

Shore, E. R., & Rivers, P. C. (1985). Peer pressure to drink: Implications for university administration and planning. *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education, 30*(3), 22-31. (EJ 323 282)

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